CHAPTER - IV

CONCLUSION

Walt Whitman’s transformation from an unoriginal and conventional writer into one who abruptly abandoned conventional rhymes and themes led him to find beauty in the commonplace that he expressed in an uncommon way. The political changes in his country brought about poetic transformation, which in turn, brought about a pivotal and empowering change in his attitude towards important issues.

Whitman wrote in the preface to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, that the poet was to be the balancer or equalizer of his land, “He is the arbiter of the diverse and he is the key. He is the equalizer of his age and land … he supplies what wants supplying and checks what wants checking” (LG, 124-26). Whitman wanted to plant poetic seed on volcanic political soil and he managed to achieve that to a great extent.

Whitman has great faith in democracy and its presence can be seen in his poems from the beginning; in the 1855 poem “Song of Myself”, he writes:

I speak the password primeval… I give the sign of democracy;

By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms (LG, 507-8)

In this poem that he rightly titled “Song of Myself”, he solemnly affirmed his solidarity with all victims of intolerance and oppression including the slave chased by the hounds. Earlier than that in an 1850 poem, “Blood Money”, he lashed out at the slave owners, who in his eyes were as guilty as Judas, since they sold “The like of God”. Whitman believed in the divinity of the individual. He also recognized the existence of evil and the necessity of its presence in creation. On the human level he could thus reject no one. The most vile being contained the same qualities as the most noble one and was entitled to the same fundamental rights as the others. He refused to condemn anyone since he himself felt as guilty as the most criminal. He admitted into his democracy all men and women, irrespective of their merits or condition. Thus, the slave found a place in Whitman’s all-encompassing embrace.
Whitman’s political beliefs were not only an intellectual conception or a combination of abstract ideas, but also the expression of an elemental instinct. Whitman’s love for the city crowds was as lively as his love for the sea or nature. From his youth he had been a “lover of popular pavements”. He loved to spend whole afternoons strolling along Broadway, looking for faces which attracted him, for eyes that positively answered the caress of his glance; In the poem “Faces”, 1855 edition, he writes:

Sauntering the pavement or crossing the ceaseless ferry, here then are faces;
I see them and complain not, and am content with all.

(LG1855, 14-15)

Thus, it is clear that, he sought out the crowds, specifically the crowds in the city, because the variety of people that Whitman sought could only be found on the busy city street. The city became the background for Whitman’s democratic yarn that ran through all his poems. It was a city with multitudes of people from different races and backgrounds coexisting in the spirit of “myself” and “enmasse”.

Whitman also gave great importance to the body. He elevates the body and brings it up to the level of the soul. He proclaims the equality of the body and the soul and calls himself as much the poet of one as the other. Whitman states in the poem, “Song of Myself”:

I have said that the soul is not more than the body, and I have said that the body is not more than the soul (LG, 1269)

Whitman spoke of the “body” with great respect. For Whitman the body is not simply an end in itself, but a means. It does not represent the goal, but a starting point. Whitman uses the body as a vehicle to convey his oneness with humanity, a common bond that is most obvious and tangible among human beings. The body became a concrete commonality that linked people from all walks of life in Whitman’s poems. The outward physical features of each human being are different from each other but all of mankind is essentially the same in bodily
composition and Whitman not only expressed that in his poems, but also shared the experience of physical existence with all humans who live and breathe:

I believe in the flesh and the appetites,
Seeing, hearing, feeling are miracles and each part and tag of me is miracle (LG, 522-23)

Thus, Whitman’s idea of democracy, “En-masse” ran through all the three aspects explored in the study. Whitman sought equality between man and woman, city and nature and slave and master:

Affection will solve every one of the problems of freedom.
Those who love each other shall be invincible...
The most dauntless and rude shall touch face to face lightly,
The dependence of liberty shall be lovers, the continuance of equality shall be comrades.¹

Whitman’s poetic writing engaged heavily with social and political realities as seen in his approach to the issues of slavery, city and the body. Whitman’s position with regard to his national culture was unique among his poetic contemporaries, Whitman was comfortable with neither of the two extremes represented by the American poetry of his day: the transcendentalists and the fireside poets. Whitman thus created a poetry that was personal and idiolectic yet immersed in social reference. He took on the poetic task of presenting a core Americanness that inspite of all its great diversity was united in a common moral, historical and aesthetic purpose.

As a poet beginning to write in America in the 1840s, Whitman engaged with the most controversial social issues of his time. The radical step that Whitman took in his poems was that he engaged with debatable social issues such as slavery, the city and the body and also the fact that he engaged with these issues in a completely new style. Mid-Nineteenth Century America was dealing with the effect of slavery like never before. For the first time since the slaves were brought from Africa, the country was politically divided over the issue. The issue was no longer limited to the plantations in the South but dissident whispers among the
slaves could be heard for the first time. Writers of the time could not get away from dealing with the matter, but their approach was conventional, just outward sympathy for the slave. Whitman, on the other hand, chose to enter into the subjectivity of the slave, giving birth to a new approach. Although the discourses surrounding slavery and abolitionism were absorbed to varying degrees by all of Whitman's contemporaries, he was the first white writer to approach the subject as an insider.

American cities experienced rapid growth during the Nineteenth Century and finally came into their own. The city however over crowded and dangerous, was the new reality of American life. Whitman's contemporaries chose to ignore this reality, but the American city, and especially New York, with its increasingly important commerce and its rapidly growing immigrant population, provided an intensely stimulating and as yet unexplored environment for a poet like Whitman. Only Whitman could fully appreciate the variety of its physical and discursive texture. The cities of America were rich with language and culture. The city with its ceaseless march of people has a magnetic effect on Whitman and he engaged with it on all levels to produce a poetry that was unprecedented and unique.

Mid-Nineteenth century discourses of literature acted either as vehicles for the censorship of the physical or were very selective in their engagement with the body. Here again Whitman presents a new viewpoint, as for him physicality is not detached from or secondary to ethical or social existence. The prevailing view of the time presented the body to be less than the soul, as well as separate from it at all levels. Whitman departed from this view and suggested a balance between the body and the soul.

Whitman transcends time in his poetry. He not only engaged with the past and the present but also showed a keen interest in the future. He writes in the poem "Song of Myself":

The past and present wilt – I have fill’d them, emptied them,
And proceed to fill my next fold of the future. (LG, 1319-20)

Whitman's futuristic thought prepared him and helped him to approach social issues like slavery and body in a new light. As a writer who could look into
the future and predict what was to come, he realized that the institution of slavery would come to an end in the near future. The issue of slavery not only required urgent attention but also a new radical approach. The attitude towards the body and the physical, however stringent during Whitman’s times, was not to remain so forever. Whitman’s idiolect on the body although shocking for his time was futuristic and he understood that it was only a matter of time before attitudes changed. Engaging in the reality of the city and city life was also in keeping with a futuristic approach. Although Nature was the preferred landscape of the writers of Whitman’s time, the city was actually the new reality of American life. Whitman engaged with the city not only to create a new radical idiolect but also because the future was incomplete without including the city in the fabric of literature. The Nineteenth Century had seen the United States pass from an agricultural to an industrial era with extraordinary rapidity and Whitman was more than alive to that prodigious growth. Whitman celebrated in the development of his country and he looked forward towards its expansion and modernization. In 1881, he rapturously proclaimed in Democratic Vistas:  

> When the present century closes, our population will be sixty or seventy millions. The pacific will be ours, and the Atlantic mainly ours. There will be daily electric communications with every part of the globe. What an age! What a land!

As Whitman wanted to change prevalent attitudes, his poetry was especially formulated to make an impact. He understood that the people of America were looking towards a new era. Literary writing needed to change to be prepared to adapt itself for the future readers.

Whitman’s idiolect was unique because he entered into the subjectivity of an individual. Whitman’s idiolect on slavery was unique because he put himself in the slave’s place. Sympathy for the slave was replaced by empathy; the reader was encouraged to replace pity with understanding. Whitman provided the reader with an opportunity not available to him/her earlier. To grasp all the complexities of the city, Whitman was not only interested in the infrastructure but also in the inhabitants of the city. The occupants of the city were of great interest to Whitman,
whether a mechanic, carpenter or a prostitute, he enters into their subjectivity when he says, “All these I feel or am”.

Whitman found beauty where other poets thought it did not exist. The body of a slave is admired for its exquisite physical beauty in the poem “I Sing the Body Electric”:

> Exquisite senses, life – lit eyes, pluck, volition,
> Flakes of breast – muscle, pliant backbone and neck,
> flesh not flabby, good sized arms and legs,
> And wonder with there yet, (LG, 93-95)

Again, Whitman achieves a newness of approach. There is empathy for the slave’s position and there is also admiration for the slave’s bodily beauty. The body itself was beautiful to Whitman. The body of the man and the body of the woman was equally beautiful to him. Then again the body was not glorified in its totality but each and every part of the body was recognized for its beauty. Never before had beauty been described in such terms, in the poem “I Sing the Body Electric”, Whitman talks about body parts that had never been presented in the same light before:

> The lung – sponges, the stomach sac, the bowels
> sweet and clean,
> The brain in its folds inside the skull – frame,
> sympathies, heart valves, sexuality, maternity,  
> (LG, 148-9)

Most of the poets of Whitman’s time found the city repulsive. Beauty and city were never used in the same sentence. The past and Nature alone seemed to them worthy of being sung in verse. There appeared to be an incompatibility between city and poetry. The beauty of nature was the only beauty worth writing about. Whitman on the other hand found beauty in the city. The Broadway, the ferry, the ballroom were charming to Whitman and he could not get enough of them. The city was beautiful not only due to its structure but also due to the people who inhabited it. The array of people found in the city, including the immigrants,
slaves, prostitutes, mechanics, the lunatic in the asylum, the doctor, all not only found a place in Whitman’s poems but also found his admiration.

Whitman was also the poet of adhesiveness, which he described as “Intense and loving comradeship, the personal attachment of man to man”. Comradeship between people was important to Whitman, since it brought equality and put an end to division. Slavery had become an issue that was dividing the Union; hence bonds of comradeship and love were the perfect solution. He wanted adhesiveness between people from all walks of life. In the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* he made an attempt to arouse the promise of comradeship:

> The dependence of Liberty shall be lovers,
> The continuance of equality shall be comrades.
> These shall tie and band stronger than hoops of iron,
> I ecstatic, partners! O Lands! Henceforth with the love of lovers tie you.
> I will make the continent indissoluble, I will make the most splendid race the sun ever yet shone upon,
> I will make divine magnetic lands. (LG 1860, p. 351)

That United States of America should always remain a strong Union was important to Whitman. Therefore, the issue of slavery took center stage in Whitman’s poetry in 1855 because he felt the union might divide over the issue. His desire to keep the union together became one of the reasons he could not ignore the impact of the institution of slavery on his country.

By the year 1855 Whitman found himself in despair. This frustration opened up new vistas of self-empowerment. In the turmoil of the 1850s Whitman came to believe that America desperately needed a poet. As a journalist he had failed to make an impact, as he was unoriginal and uninspiring. This realization and his intense and deep desire to provide America with an original literature prompted the writing of *Leaves of Grass*, his most original work. Creating a new original work required dealing with issues that were either too controversial or just simply ignored by the literary world. The issues of slavery and the physical were
controversial, whereas the city was largely ignored. Whitman knew that not only was a highly personalized register required in dealing with these issues, a new approach was also needed.

The physical self of Whitman is the authentic vital center of *Leaves of Grass*. Thoreau observed that “The poet writes the history of his own body”, and Whitman literally made his theory true. In the reigning days of American Victorianism, genteel men of letters were infuriated by what they imagined to be Whitman’s unseemly pleasure in chanting about the body and its functions. Art historian Charles Eliot Norton, who reviewed the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, observed that the work contained “Passages of intolerable coarseness – not gross and licentious, but disgustingly coarse”. The body had always existed in a social and cultural context but its inclusion in high forms of literature was very limited. Whitman created a new model; by making sacred his bodily drives and functions. He endorsed the animal element in everyone’s life. By exalting his physique he demonstrated the concept of fitness. By showing his enthusiasm for health and physical culture, he fashioned the Whitman persona – a healer and a prophet of spiritual and physical perfectibility. Whitman’s reverence for the body, the physical, the corporeal, was an attempt to deny the depravity of man. He wanted men and women to be proudly natural.

Whitman wrote, “I adhere to my city” because the city alone had the capacity to “make me glutted, enrich’d of soul”. Before Whitman the position that the city usually held in poetry was to be projected against nature. Whitman gave the city some dignity. He valued the city for its faces and streets and for its incessant teeming life. With no poetic literary discourse to draw inspiration from Whitman did an appropriate job of including city life in his poems.

The issue of slavery too had not found an appropriate mention in Nineteenth-Century American poetry. The concern showed by poets was too distant and impersonal. Whitman took note and developed a radical approach to evoke an appropriate response from his readers. He wanted his readers to switch places with the slave to fully understand the slave’s suffering.

Walt Whitman wrote in the 1855 preface to the *Leaves of Grass*: 

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The American poets are to enclose old and new for America is the race of races. Of them a bard is to be commensurate with a people. To him the other continents arrive as contributors... he gives them reception for their sake and his own sake. His spirit responds to his country’s spirit...  

(61-64)

Whitman wanted to fulfill the role of America’s bard by addressing issues he felt constituted the spirit and fabric of American life. He addressed these issues in *Leaves of Grass* that he thought were most important to America’s individualism. In a poem titled “L. of G.’s Purport”, (LG, p.555) he wrote:

Not to exclude or demarcate, or pick out evils from their formidable masses (even to expose them)
But add, fuse, complete extend- and celebrate the immortal and the good.
Haughty this song, its words and scope,
To span vast realms of space and time,
Evolution – the cumulative-growths and generations  

(LG, 1-5).

To conclude it would be appropriate to say that Whitman fused words into flesh and filled them with the warmth of life. He achieved an artistic triumph by not only writing successfully the history of his own body but also by attaching himself with controversial issues. By dealing with these issues in a unique manner he became a radical poet and created an idiolectic expression unparalleled in American literature.
END NOTES – INTRODUCTION


END NOTES – CHAPTER I


5. Walt Whitman, *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*. Ed. Emory Holloway. 2 Vols (Garden city: Doubleday, 1921). Subsequent references will be cited in the text as UPP.


